PHILOSOPHERS AND KINGS: EDUCATION FOR LEADERSHIP IN MODERN ENGLAND

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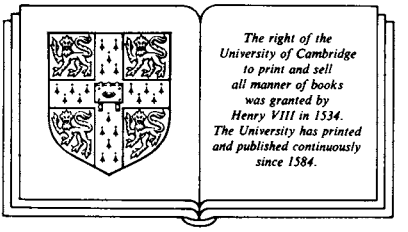

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CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

I

INTRODUCTION

'Therefore we must elect as ruler and guardian of the city him who as boy and youth and man has been tested and has come out without strain, and render him honours in life and after death, giving him the highest rewards of public burial and other memorials. The others we must reject.'[1] In this way Plato began to elaborate his thesis of 'education for leadership' in the fourth century BC. It was to become a key theme in the humanist scholarship of the sixteenth century, and later, in the nineteenth century, assumed the status and trappings of an English tradition. To a large extent it has fallen from favour in twentieth-century Britain. Nevertheless, there have been several attempts during the present century to adapt the notion to meet changing social, political and cultural demands and opportunities. This book is chiefly concerned with the characteristics, implications and ultimate fate of these more recent efforts.

The historiography of nineteenth-century English education has rightly emphasised the theme of leadership and its social and political implications, especially in relation to the public schools. Historians such as Rupert Wilkinson, J.A. Mangan and Mark Girouard have vividly depicted an ideology that asserted the necessity to train a cohesive, enlightened elite to rule nation and Empire.[2] By contrast, little attention has been paid to the development of the ideal since 1914. In most accounts it is replaced by a preoccupation with attempts to achieve 'equality of opportunity', variously defined; what had been celebrated in the late nineteenth century as a quintessentially English tradition is doomed to steady decline. To be sure, there has been continued fascination with the 'old school tie', with the influence and prestige of the public schools. But such influence has tended to be seen either as quaintly irrelevant or as anachronistic, leading it to be interpreted most commonly as a static and fading ideal, rooted irrevocably in the nineteenth century, marooned and out of place in a modern democracy. Critiques of the public school in the twentieth century have reinforced this image.[3] Attempts to reinvigorate and adapt 'education for leadership' in the changing context of the twentieth century have been all but ignored.

A closer inspection begins to reveal not only continuing attention to this

general theme as an educational, social and political priority, but also important changes in its presentation and focus. Once firmly rooted in the public schools attended by a small elite minority, it came to be applied to schools attended by the mass of the people. Originally associated with the classical curriculum, it underwent a metamorphosis that allowed it eventually to support the claims of industry and science. Its elitist connotations most readily supported conservative thought and the retention of established hierarchies, yet it could prove equally attractive to radical and even socialist initiatives in education. This book attempts to outline and explain these adaptations. It seeks also to address what appears to be a most troubling puzzle: why it was that, despite the overall decline of the Platonic vision and of the classic ideology of the public schools during the twentieth century, educational and social inequalities have remained almost impervious to reform. It seems that competitive individualism has largely replaced explicitly hierarchical notions of social relationships in twentieth-century education, leaving established inequalities relatively unscathed. The aspirations of egalitarian reformers have been effectively frustrated throughout. If we are fully to comprehend the reasons for this, it is necessary to reconstruct the various forces that have been involved. This book seeks to help restore a significant piece of the puzzle to the overall picture.

Several educational historians have explored and sought to explain the persistence of educational inequalities in twentieth-century England, usually emphasising the role of academic selection and examinations in legitimising 'success' and 'failure'. One of the best and most influential treatments, Brian Simon's *The Politics of Educational Reform, 1920–1940* notes that in the interwar years education was regarded as a race in which the fittest won through to the finish and the unfit dropped out, a situation that reflected the realities of a selective and competitive system. Simon continues: 'Once incorporated in the school system, in terms of classification for purposes of selection, this doctrine justified that system and the society that gave it birth by stratifying children ever more distinctly.'[4] This view helps to explain the importance of devices such as intelligence testing, and the continuing resilience even after the second world war of 'the doctrine that secondary education is not for all, that only the selected qualify for a complete form of it, that the requirements of the few will define provision for the many at whatever cost to that majority, that differentiation will prevail, even if it negates education, in terms of streaming and classification for the purposes of selection'.[5] The present work argues that there was a further factor involved in patterns of educational inequality, another *type* of inequality, that has tended to be neglected: the survival, extension and adaptation of an ideology that had hitherto been centred on the public schools. That is to say, inequalities were structured and reinforced not only through the apparatus of selection and classification, not only through the imperatives of the academic curriculum in what R.H. Tawney called the 'tadpole society', but also through the *moral* curriculum of English secondary

education. The preparation of pupils for the society to which they belonged, which has reflected a strong and enduring Platonic influence in English secondary education, has been just as important as the academic curriculum of examination-centred school subjects in reproducing and constructing inequality. This book seeks to reassert the vital contribution of the Platonic influence in fashioning the values and structures of English secondary education in the twentieth century.

If we focus on secondary education, it is easy to discern three general phases of development since the turn of the century. First would be the period from the Education Act of 1902 until the second world war, when state secondary (grammar) schools were restricted to a small minority of the population. The grammar schools charged fees, but also had a system of 'free places' of scholarships for pupils from the elementary schools who passed an examination at the age of eleven. The majority of children went only to elementary school; a small number went on to junior technical schools at the age of thirteen. The School Certificate examination, introduced in 1917, offered grammar school pupils the credentials to proceed to university and into respectable, secure and well-paid professional careers.[6] During this period, the key issues with respect to 'education for leadership' were, first, to what extent the established public schools would be able to retain their predominance in this field and, second, how far the grammar schools would be able to share in or even take over this role.

The second phase comprises the period from the Education Act of 1944 to the educational reorganisations of the 1960s. This was the era of the so-called 'tripartite system' of secondary education. Under the 1944 Act, secondary education was to be free and provided for all from the age of eleven, and a minimum leaving age was soon set at fifteen. But local education authorities were encouraged to provide three different types of secondary school, each intended for different types of pupil. The grammar schools were to remain, for the top 20 per cent or so of the age-range as judged in academic competition at 11-plus. Secondary technical schools, at least in theory of an equal stature to the grammar schools, were to be oriented towards industry and commerce rather than to the professions. Meanwhile, secondary modern schools were supposed to cater for the majority of the age-range. In practice, grammar schools retained their supremacy in terms of popular appeal and resources and as the key route to university and the professions. Secondary technical schools failed to develop in most areas as was envisaged, and modern schools only rarely managed to find a coherent and integrated approach to their ill-considered role.[7] In this situation, then, the grammar schools still tended to be the chief focus in discussions of how to promote education for leadership. And yet although the 'tripartite system' resembled nothing more than a working model of Plato's classic typology of gold, silver and copper, the social and political context of postwar England led to a strong challenge to notions of education for leadership, and to a sharp

decline in their currency. Grammar schools in this period came in fact to depend less on any claims for social and political leadership than on their academic record as a justification for their continued existence.

The third phase takes us from the spread of comprehensive schools in the 1960s up to the present day. Intended for all abilities and aptitudes, these schools have not in general produced the kind of equality that was often anticipated at their inception but have tended rather to incorporate the structures of the grammar schools. Stephen Ball has reported that the 'vast majority' of comprehensive schools have effectively maintained policies that reflect earlier notions of 'meritocracy and separate provision'.[8] According to Ball, then, the 'noise' of educational reform has generally not been matched by 'real' changes in educational practices.[9] Ivor Goodson makes a similar point to explain the lack of change in curriculum patterns: 'As in the tripartite system so in the comprehensive system, academic subjects for able pupils are accorded the highest status and resources. The triple alliance between academic subjects, academic examinations and able pupils ensures that comprehensive schools provide similar patterns of success and failure to previous school systems.'[10] Thus well-established forms of curriculum and assessment have survived the outward shift to comprehensive education, with the result that the criteria for success are substantially the same as in the heyday of the grammar schools.

Again, however, it is important here to distinguish between the academic curriculum and the moral curriculum. There seems in general to have been a lack of attention to the cultivation of social and political leadership in the comprehensive schools that is chiefly attributable to the emergence of a what David Hargreaves has called a 'culture of individualism', and a loss of earlier concerns with the social functions of education.[11] Hargreaves argues forcefully that 'Our present obsession with individuals has led teachers to deny and fear the social functions of education, and sociological critics to point out that some of those nineteenth-century functions are still operative within our society and must be rooted out.'[12] And yet he too seems content to explain this simply in terms of the incorporation within the comprehensive schools of the academic 'grammar school curriculum', the 'heavy emphasis on the cognitive-intellectual skills and abilities of the traditional school subjects'.[13] This notion tends to neglect the partial way in which comprehensives tended to interpret what the grammar school curriculum involved. It also implies that the grammar school curriculum was a simple, static, even ahistorical construct that could easily be applied to new institutions regardless of changes in society and culture. Surely, however, there was much more to the grammar school curriculum than such a view would suggest. We should give more scrutiny to the changing fortunes and composition of the moral curriculum in twentieth-century secondary education. In such a project the social and educational role of 'education for leadership' must be central. More specifically, what still needs attention is the historical decline of the kind of moral curriculum originally associated with the

public schools and largely transferred to the state grammar schools in the early part of the twentieth century. In fact over the last quarter of a century the ideal of 'education for leadership' has been consigned to the outer margins of English educational debate. This situation has not significantly altered in the late 1980s despite renewed interest in 'Victorian values', heated discussions over the character and aims of secondary schooling and the introduction in 1988 of the Education Reform Act.

While the actual idea of education for leadership has fallen into disrepute since the second world war, then, the social divisions that underpinned the provision of schooling in the Victorian era have proven in practice to be remarkably resilient. The late Raymond Williams, writing in the early 1960s at a time when it could be hoped that comprehensive schools might radically transform established patterns, noted a basic continuity in twentieth-century secondary education of a framework drawn from the rigid class society of nineteenth-century England.[14] This framework was essentially tripartite in character, consisting of a 'liberal' education for the dominant social group, technical instruction for those intended to be skilled workers and a rudimentary schooling in the expected codes of behaviour and work for the majority of the population. Through economic and social changes and a large increase in the scale of provision of schooling this has been a familiar and recurring pattern in twentieth-century secondary education. These distinctions and gradations were at their most explicit, institutionalised as they were in the three types of school, in the 1940s and 1950s, but they remained pervasive in the comprehensive schools and may well re-emerge with renewed strength following the educational reforms of the 1980s. Although distinctively Platonic in its overall form, however, there was an important ingredient that seemed increasingly to be missing. The tripartite structure was maintained and reinforced by the ingrained assumptions and realities of social class, but the guiding vision of 'education for leadership' struggled to survive.

In order to come to terms with the waning fortunes of education for leadership, and with the successive patterns of secondary education in twentieth-century England, we must understand them in their changing social and historical context. The decline and eventual disappearance of the British Empire in itself implied important changes in the role of schooling, for the social elite as for the rest of the population. Less and less could it be claimed that education for leadership was necessary in order to groom a select few to govern the natives of a global empire, as the public schools had done in the Victorian era. If the idea of education for leadership was to survive the retreat from Empire, therefore, it required fresh justifications to support it. At the same time the demands of the English people themselves, the clamour of democracy, extended and improved the provision of schooling for all: a 'silent social revolution' that challenged among other things the previously unquestioned preeminence of the public schools. This in turn raised the issue of how far the

kind of preparation that had once been attached exclusively to the public schools should be extended to a wider group of pupils – first to those in state grammar schools, then to secondary schools designed to cater for the whole age-range.

Education for leadership, as a basic principle underpinning education, was also directly affected by other major developments in twentieth-century society and politics. The two world wars raised different kinds of issues impinging on education for leadership. The first helped at least for a time to bolster claims of a moral kind on behalf of this ideal. The second excited discussions of how to produce citizens who would lead the struggle against fascism, but also encouraged stronger notions of equality and democracy that were eventually to discredit the whole idea of education for leadership. The existence of sharp social divisions and differences in the early part of the century, reflected in the growth of class politics and industrial conflict, led some educators to try to create more flexible, imaginative or subtle leadership through changes in the kind of training imparted to the future rulers. But there was also resistance to the connotations of social control inherent in this approach that in the longer term probably helped to make education for leadership a tainted proposition. The rise of the welfare state and growing aspirations for social equality at mid-century combined to render older notions of education for leadership increasingly anachronistic. On the other hand it was by no means clear what kind of education *would* be appropriate to encourage the right kind of 'leadership' for what was hoped would be a classless and more equal society.

As a result of such developments, many institutions and ideas that had previously gone unquestioned underwent searching and often hostile reassessment. The changing reception of Plato is a good example of this kind of process. It could be said that the twentieth century has remodelled Plato in its own image. From the liberal reformer familiar to Victorian audiences,[15] Plato has become identified and most often reviled as the source of modern totalitarianism. The social and political implications of his *Republic* have increasingly outweighed appreciation of his ideas on aesthetics, or even of the details of his educational proposals. The public schools that were so authoritative in the late nineteenth century have similarly fallen from grace, often coming under attack for being in some way responsible for many of the problems and failures that Britain has experienced during the present century. Thus for example Wilkinson and more recently Peter Parker have related the sacrifices and disasters of the Great War to the shortcomings of the 'public school ethos'.[16] At the same time such historians as Correlli Barnett have suggested that the cultural values encouraged by the public schools have been at least partly responsible for Britain's 'industrial decline', and therefore also for the nation's relative economic decline.[17] It is in this inauspicious climate of opinion that we must appraise the changing fortunes during the twentieth century of what was

probably the key principle not only of Plato but also of the public schools: education for leadership.

It seems appropriate for the purposes of the present study to concentrate mainly on the sphere of *secondary* education. It is this level of schooling that has been most directly comparable to that of the public schools of the nineteenth century. It is also here that we can see most clearly the character and effects of the overall shift from an elite form to a mass basis of schooling. Wider implications for higher education and adult education should not, however, be ignored; indeed, the role of higher education, and the dissemination and reception of the ideal of education for leadership in other countries, are important themes that are each worthy of substantial studies in their own right.[18] The present work will discuss some of the most direct ways in which these spheres interrelated with secondary education, and it is hoped that further research will focus on these other areas to explore in greater detail their distinctive and comparable characteristics. It is also most suitable to limit the present work to a discussion of the *English* experience in secondary education, in due recognition that, in so many respects, the traditions and practices of Scotland, Wales, and the two Irelands have been substantially different. It is the adaptation, indeed at some points the reconstitution, of what has often been regarded as a distinctively 'English tradition' with which this book is principally concerned.

In the following chapters, therefore, the twentieth-century career of this idea will be examined as it has been reflected in English secondary education, paying special attention to chosen educators who have emphasised the notion and to key episodes in its development and demise. This will help to illuminate the educational work of such figures as Cyril Norwood, Eric James and Victor Gollancz, the significance of which has been unjustly neglected. It will also be possible to relate the concerns of the Norwood report on the secondary school curriculum and examinations, published in 1943, and of the Fleming report on public schools of the following year, to their long-term historical context. And it will help us more fully to understand the contributions of critics of education for leadership such as T.C. Worsley, Richard Crossman and Michael Young. Further, this book bears witness not only to the general decline, even disintegration, of the ideal but also to a number of startling mutations that have occurred as its sympathisers sought to adapt it to the changing concerns and priorities of the twentieth century. In this situation there have been diehards who have defended the classic ideal to their final breath, but also revisionists and radicals who have tried to compromise on selected aspects while adhering to the faith. A number of versions of education for leadership, including the moral, the military, the meritocratic, the scientific, the industrial and the socialist, have resulted from these efforts.

The sources employed to explore this theme comprise a wide range of

evidence that reveals the extent to which education for leadership, in its various guises, has been a significant topic for debate in English secondary education during the present century. Texts such as Norwood's *English Tradition of Education* (1929) and James's *Education and Leadership* (1951) may readily be used to assess changes in the presentation and orientation of the ideal. Their reception and the kinds of debates that surrounded them also help us to gauge the influence that education for leadership exerted on secondary education and also the relationship of the ideal to wider social and political configurations, although these aspects are bound to be more contentious and problematic. The ideals of leading educators and the policy formulations of the Board and Ministry of Education did not permeate educational practice in any automatic, immediate or predictable way. Very often, too, the efforts of individual pupils, teachers and schools have succeeded in resisting or transcending the ideals and structures that have been imposed upon them. Moreover, educational change has not had anything like the kind of simple or linear relationship to political, social or economic change that is often assumed. The present work focuses more upon an important discourse on the value and role of education for leadership that sought to justify, sustain and develop an educational ideal. Chapter 2 discusses the 'English tradition' at its height in the nineteenth century, and the needs and opportunities that combined to make it appear no less important in the early decades of the twentieth century. In chapter 3, we focus on the changing rationale of the public school in the twentieth century, with special reference to the key debates of the second world war that culminated in the Fleming report. We then turn to the career and ideology of an influential educator whose reputation has declined in recent years, Sir Cyril Norwood. His hopes for the state education system, expressed finally in the Norwood report of 1943, encouraged him to attempt to build upon the classic public school ethos and adapt it to a changing society. Similarly in the postwar years, the energetic attempts of Eric James of Manchester Grammar School to revitalise and update the idea of education for leadership form the focus of chapter 5. The aims of the 'technocrats' of the 1950s and their relationship to earlier notions of enlightened social and political leadership are studied in chapter 6. We then examine the radical attempts of some in the labour movement during the twentieth century to develop education designed to promote socialist leadership. Lastly, in chapter 8, some lessons for our contemporary education and for the future of our society will be suggested in the light of historical change. The changing discourse surrounding education for leadership in the twentieth century does not provide us with a 'usable past' in the strong sense that has been claimed for other dimensions of our recent educational history, such as secondary technical education.[19] Many would see it as simply unusable for contemporary policy purposes. It raises implications and is associated with themes that in many ways are very hard to reconcile with current aspirations and assumptions. On the other hand, the explanatory leverage that it offers is of significant value towards

a greater understanding of the changing roles and aims of secondary education in particular. To assert the importance of education for leadership in twentieth-century England is not to indulge in a nostalgic lament. Still less is it to call for the revival of arguments that owed their currency to particular contexts and needs in any simple, wholesale or unreconstructed manner. The chief aim of the study is to help explain, through recourse to aspects that have been unfairly neglected, important characteristics and problems of English education both in the past and in the present.